

The Changing Patterns of Development in Western North Carolina

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The release and popular appeal of the movie *The Last of the Mohicans* has again showcased the mountains of western North Carolina to a national audience. Although the film depicts a location in upstate New York in 1757, the film's credits and promotional material have advertised the set locations throughout the North Carolina mountains.

The suitability and use of the mountain area for such a film highlights some of the changes taking place in this popular region of North Carolina. The mountain region of North Carolina is one of the few areas in the country that still possesses some of the unique natural characteristics of the New York mountains in 1757. These natural features exist because of historic circumstances which are viewed as beneficial by some and detrimental by others. This article will attempt to focus on the natural and cultural circumstances that have affected the attitudes towards change occurring in the region today.

The mountain people, culture and economy are products of the geography and natural resources of the mountains. While some settlers came to the region to seek refuge and land ownership in an isolated area, others came to exploit the natural resources. The Native Americans and early European settlers in the region lived from the land and the flora and fauna of the region. Later arrivals came to the region as refugees from unhealthy climates or as tourists to enjoy the recently discovered scenic beauty of a region uniquely situated between northern and southern latitudes.

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The natural features of the land and the social and economic characteristics of the people attracted to the region have established patterns of development, economic conditions and social and cultural values that potentially enrich and restrict future development. Although isolation in the mountain region has restricted development of some economic opportunities, isolation has to some degree served as a protection from the ravages of over-development. Exploitation of natural resources often conflicts with the preservation of the scenic beauty that attracts other forms of economic development. Each group of newcomers to the region has brought new ideas, values and lifestyles, many of which conflict with those established earlier.

The evolving patterns of conflict between and assimilation of the generations of natives and newcomers has been a struggle for every generation in the region. To effectively manage this dynamic region, its citizens and leaders will have to understand and work with the physical, cultural and economic realities that have evolved in these magnificent mountains.

What is Western North Carolina?

The eastern ridge of the Appalachian mountains, commonly known as the Blue Ridge, is usually considered the eastern boundary of western North Carolina. Although political boundaries of counties that border or are bisected by this ridge are frequently considered "mountain counties," those areas west of the Blue Ridge are more appropriately associated with traditional mountain people and culture. In recent years, however, state and federal programs have included some counties east of the Blue Ridge as part of western North Carolina.

In areas east of and adjacent to the Blue Ridge, "family and kin" have migrated in and out, blurring the distinction perceived to exist between those who live in the mountains and those who live "off the mountain."

This distinction, encompassing both social and cultural characterizations, remains in varying degrees a definition of the region.

Isolation of the Early Years

With the exception of scattered trappers, traders and explorers, the mountains were the exclusive domain of the Cherokee Indians prior to the late 1700s. The first wave of Colonial and European settlers arrived in the mountains during the last quarter of the 18th century and continued to migrate there through the latter part of the 19th century. These Scotch, Irish, Celtic, English and German settlers accepted the physical, social and cultural isolation imposed by the mountains in order to acquire their own land.

Having little contact with the world beyond the Blue Ridge, the mountaineers became a self-reliant and insular people. Outside the extended family, the church, school and courthouse were focal points of community life. Poor access to and within the mountains limited communication with people and institutions outside the region. As a result, the rest of the state usually ignored the mountain region, and a tradition of benign neglect befell the mountain region and its people.

In the years leading up to the Civil War, there was a marked division in the sentiments of the region. Except in very isolated cases, the institution of slavery was not practiced in western North Carolina. Farms were small and the economics of slavery did not fit the system of subsistence farming practiced in the mountains. Although few battles were fought in the mountains, the tragic and painful division of community and family split the region. Nowhere in North Carolina was this division more acute than in the mountains. Many families with relatives living in the region during the mid-19th century share stories of families split by their allegiance to the Union or Confederate cause. Remnants of these divisions can be found in the region today.

Traditional Economic Base

The mountain region historically has had an economy based on natural resources. The original settlers of the region, including Native Americans, relied on the land and forests for their existence. Although fertile soils do exist in river valleys and colluvial deposits at lower elevations, agricultural operations have been difficult because of the topography, the absence of large tracts of land with good soil and the shorter growing season imposed by the elevation.

Following traditions of the Native Americans, early settlers learned the medicinal values of the many native plants and herbs found in the region. Families often supplemented their income by gathering and selling native plants which were popular in this country and, as in the case of ginseng, highly valued as an aphrodisiac in

the Far East. These gatherers, known locally as "wildcrafters," continue to operate in parts of the region.

Agriculture

Subsistence farming was the predominant economic activity in the early years of settlement. Farms produced a variety of crops and raised enough animals to sustain themselves. The production of cash crops generated income by utilizing adaptive plants and animals suited to the region's climate and constraints. Cabbage, potatoes, apples, Burley tobacco, beef cattle and sheep were widely sold products. Another staple crop of the region was corn. However, because of the difficulty in shipping large quantities of corn to other markets, many mountaineers used an ancient and well-known method of converting corn to its liquid essence and obtained a much higher price for a product that was much lighter, although not necessarily easier to transport. [see sidebar]

Since the 1960s, marijuana, another high value crop with a legal cloud has grown increasingly popular with some sectors of the population. Frequently grown in remote fields amidst other crops, the weed of Woodstock has in part, carried on the tradition of the mountain moonshiners. However, today's "revenueurs" employ high-tech methods of aircraft surveillance and aerial photography to locate and destroy this crop that fuels the underground economy.

Small farm operations have declined in the mountain region, following similar trends nationwide. Despite declining production of many crops, including Burley tobacco and livestock, several agricultural products are doing well.

The production of apples remains a significant part of Henderson County's economy. It ranks as the largest

Agricultural Origins of Stock Car Racing

Transportation of corn transformed to liquid spirits (a.k.a. white lightning, mountain dew, moonshine) was the beginning of other economic activities in the region. The first was the sport of stock car racing. Because of some rather strict laws regulating the sale and transportation of this crop derivative produced in a "tax-free environment," those involved in its transportation and sale required fast cars to remain in business. On weekends after deliveries had been made, some of the boastful drivers would make claims about who could deliver the goods via the fastest car. The obvious outcome of these boasts was a race to resolve the claim. Races were considered a more acceptable endeavor in the eyes of the law and drew a loyal and growing number of fans. These races quickly moved into other areas of the South and developed into one of the largest spectator sports in the country.



Ore Knob copper mine in Ashe County, c. 1960. This 1,000-foot-deep mine, operated between 1873-1883 and 1952-1962, was the state's largest producer of copper.

apple-producing county east of the Mississippi River. Apples have been the primary agricultural product for several generations, although the techniques for producing apples have changed significantly since World War II. New varieties of trees have been introduced which are smaller, produce more apples, are more resistant to disease and mature in a shorter period of time. Although new technology has been incorporated in growing the crop, apple growers rely on migrant workers to pick the harvest each fall.

A second exception to the declining agricultural sector in western North Carolina is the production of Christmas trees and other ornamental nursery species. This agricultural activity has been expanding rapidly since the 1960s, particularly in Avery County. The Fraser Fir and the Norway Spruce, the most popular and marketable species of Christmas trees, are grown at elevations above 3,500 feet. Other species of evergreen trees, including White Pine and Hemlock, as well as many trees and shrubs used by nurseries for landscaping, are grown at lower elevations throughout the region. In Avery County, former croplands, pastures, woodlands, and in many cases, front and back yards have been converted to rows of trees over the past 20 years.

Logging

An abundance of natural resources coupled with a shortage of labor, transportation and markets led to the region's development as an extraction-based economy. With plentiful wildlife and vast spruce, fir and mixed hardwood forests, the tanning and lumber industries developed in the early years. Logging operations before the railroads arrived were limited by the lack of equipment and primitive transportation systems. The railroad quickly provided access to the forests and opened the

region to national markets. By the early 1920s, most of the native growth timber had been cut. Most of the areas have had second growth forests of mixed hardwoods, white pine, hemlock and some spruce and fir restored to the ridges and valleys of the region. However, in places like the Shining Rock/Graveyard Fields section of Haywood County, the magnificent spruce, fir and hemlock forests that were cut and inadvertently burned never returned.

The availability of timber eventually spawned the development of the furniture industry in foothill communities east of the Blue Ridge. After years of abuse and poor logging practices, George Vanderbilt's forest management practices were adopted and the concept of managed public forest lands was initiated by the federal government.

Mining

Mining of subsurface mineral resources was another extractive activity developed early in the mountain region, although it never achieved the notoriety or impact of coal mining in West Virginia and Kentucky. Western North Carolina has produced a variety of minerals, including iron ore at Cranberry in Avery County, copper ore at the Ore Knob site in Ashe County, large dimension marble in Cherokee County, talc in Cherokee and Madison Counties and mica throughout the region. All of these mines have ceased operation or suffered significant declines.

However, some of the minerals traditionally mined in the region are still in demand because of either continued need or changing uses. For example, mica was once an essential component in insulators and electronic equipment. Today, scrap mica, a by-product of kaolin and feldspar processing, is used in the manufacturing of sheetrock joint cement, paints and drilling mud. Quartz products from Mitchell County are now used in manufacturing micro-chips for computers. Feldspar and kaolin, also mined in Mitchell County, continue to be the raw materials for the ceramic, porcelain and glass industries. Building stone, used in the construction of homes and structures in western North Carolina for years, is now being mined, processed and exported to "stone-poor" areas like Florida and Louisiana.

Precious and semi-precious gems are found at a variety of locations in the region. Specimens of ruby, sapphire, aquamarine, emerald, amethyst and garnet have been found in various locations in the mountain region and in some of the adjacent counties. The two counties most frequently associated with these gems are Macon and Mitchell. While the mining of these gems has not had a significant economic impact, the mystique of

finding a valuable gemstone has moved from the mining industry to the tourism industry. Gem mining is now associated with attracting tourists to roadside operations where, for a per-bucket fee, anyone may attempt to find a precious stone.

Health and Tourism

One of the first settlements of non-mountaineers in the region was the Flat Rock community in Henderson County in the early 19th century. These visitors were residents of Charleston and the surrounding low country of South Carolina who came to the mountains to escape the hot, malarial summers. During the 1800s, the mountain climate was promoted as having curative powers for many respiratory diseases.

Early in the 1900s another small resort town was established as a retreat for Lowcountry citizens escaping the hot summers. A popular story holds that two of the early founders of this community, Mr. Kelsey and Mr. Hutchinson, derived its location by placing two intersecting lines on a map of the eastern United States. The lines were drawn from Chicago to Savannah, Georgia and from New York City to New Orleans. The intersecting point was the location of Highlands, named for its 4,000-foot-plus elevation in the Blue Ridge mountains in southern Macon County.

Sanitoriums, inns, hotels and boarding houses became increasingly common in those parts of the region where access could be established and capital found to build and operate such an establishment. As word of the region's beauty and medicinal powers spread, tourists and people seeking less expensive land came in increasing numbers as the 19th century moved into its last quarter.

Water has played a primary role in the development patterns of the region. Although the region's rivers offered limited transportation, most of the early roads and the railroads were located along the rivers. The resort town of Hot Springs, located on the banks of the French Broad River in Madison County, derived its name from the more than 20 hot water springs. Discovered by two soldiers pursuing Indians in 1778, the town quickly developed into a health resort. By 1830 the construction of a series of grand hotels had begun. The first golf course in North Carolina is attributed to the town's Mountain Park Hotel. For almost a century tourists and health enthusiasts arrived by the Buncombe Turnpike and by rail to consume and bathe in the medicinal and 100° F. waters of the springs. However, by 1920, most of the hotels had burned and major floods had damaged the spring facilities.

The most significant event in the region during the 19th century was the coming of the railroad to the Asheville area in 1880. The railroad further opened this

once-closed society to the world. Within the next 20 years many areas of western North Carolina underwent dramatic changes as a result of the railroad's presence.

The railroad accelerated access to western North Carolina and its resources. Most of the region's large estates were developed during this period. The 125,000-acre Biltmore estate was acquired and developed by George Vanderbilt. The magnificent country estate house was designed by Richard Morris Hunt and completed in 1895. The grounds of the estate were planned and developed by Frederick Law Olmstead. After Vanderbilt's death his wife gave a large portion of the vast estate to the U.S. government. This donation was the foundation of the first National Forest which is today a large portion of the Pisgah National Forest. The Biltmore house and the remaining 8,000 acre estate, owned and managed by Vanderbilt's grandson, William A.V. Cecil, is one of the featured tourist destinations in the region.

Several North Carolina residents developed large estates and summer homes in the northwestern part of the mountain region between Grandfather Mountain and Blowing Rock. Hugh MacRae purchased a large tract which included Grandfather Mountain and the adjacent area he helped develop into Linville Resort. To the north and east of Grandfather Mountain, two prominent Greensboro businessmen, Julian Price and Caesar Cone, purchased large estates and built large summer homes. These family estates represented two of the larger summer places established in this section of the mountains. Both of these estates were later donated to the National Park Service as recreational facilities. Similarly, Hugh Morton, grandson of Hugh MacRae and current owner of the remaining large acreage of the Grandfather Mountain property, has donated almost 2,000 acres to the Nature Conservancy for permanent protection.

These large estates are best known because they have been preserved in large tracts and are accessible to some degree by the public. Other estates remain as only historic footnotes. One such estate was located in Graham County. George Moore from Chicago discovered this remote area and sought to establish a hunting preserve for use by his friends. A large tract was acquired and fenced, a hunting lodge was built, and pens were constructed to raise and hold many species of game animals from around the world. Russian Wild Boar, non-native species of bear, elk, antelope, buffalo and game birds were imported and stocked on the preserve. Difficulty in maintaining the estate, poaching and other factors led to the abandonment of the estate after several years. Few remnants of the estate remain, with the notable exception of the wild boar. The boar has adapted and bred with domestic stock to produce a prolific species that has spread to a wider range and is still hunted.

Boom Years

The railroad's presence led to a new wave of interest and discovery in the mountain region. The 1920s roared into the mountain region on the rails and trails of speculative development occurring throughout the Southeast region, especially in the newly developing state of Florida. During the decade of the 1920s, communities with rail access flourished. Asheville, a small community of regional trade, health and tourist interests, grew from approximately 28,000 citizens to over 50,000 in a brief nine-year period. More impressive than the population growth during this period was the dramatic increase in property values. The rapid physical and economic growth occurring during these years did not reach every area but had a significant impact on those areas with access to rail and the expanding road system.

Remote rural areas did not share equitably in the prosperity and improvements brought to the towns and resorts during these years. Although Asheville was reported to be the second city in the world to have electric street cars, many rural areas in the mountains did not have electricity, public water or sewer. The division between the "haves" and "have-nots" in the mountains established itself along the lines of cities versus rural areas and newcomers versus natives. In this turn-of-the-century environment, Asheville's native son, writer Thomas Wolfe, often focused on this clash of lifestyles.

The expansion of resort and health facilities brought other visitors and residents to the mountains. In addition to Wolfe, writers F. Scott Fitzgerald and O. Henry (William Sidney Porter) had connections in Asheville. Noted politicians and industrialists, including William Jennings Bryan, Henry Ford and Harvey Firestone, frequented the area as guests, some purchasing property in the community. Skilled craftsmen and professionals, many originally drawn to Asheville to develop the Biltmore Estate, remained in the area, enriching the culture of the region. Others, like the young Walt Disney and Charlton Heston, worked here briefly before moving on to other places.

The influx of these newcomers and the rush of new technology and construction had much less impact on rural areas and citizens. Although markets for agricultural goods increased and new service jobs developed in the urban centers, rural conditions in the mountains lagged behind those in the cities and rural areas in other parts of the state.

The Crash and Dormant Years

The economic depression of the 1930s that befell the entire country with the October 1929 stock market crash was preceded in western North Carolina by a natural disaster that occurred in Florida. In the late 1920s, a hurricane struck the coast of Florida and severely dam-

aged the properties of investors who also had developments in Asheville and other parts of western North Carolina. The resulting loss of capital to further speculative development in the mountain area softened the real estate market prior to the 1929 debacle on Wall Street.

Western North Carolina suffered with the nation during the thirties and early war years of the forties. Populations declined throughout the region as birth rates fell and people left the area in search of employment. Those called to serve in the war effort left for the service, and following the war many took jobs in other regions with better employment opportunities. The location of two major industrial operations during the expansion years, Champion Paper Mill and the Enka Fiber Mill, provided one of the few economic cushions during the region's hard years.

Although the war years brought hardships for families and the region, it did bring some rather unique opportunities. Because of its relatively isolated location (in the context of World War II geography), Asheville housed a communications center for the Weather Wing of the U.S. Army Air Force in the City Building. Many of the nation's art treasures were secretly moved from the National Gallery in Washington to the Biltmore House where they remained until after the war. The Veterans Hospital in Asheville, originally constructed as a tuberculosis sanatorium in the 1920s, was used as a recuperative hospital for injured veterans. For a brief period of time during the war, the presidential cottage at the Grove Park Inn was used as headquarters for the Philippine government in exile. The Grove Park Inn in Asheville served as a wartime internment facility for some special prisoners of war. Rumors still surface about German spies operating from a house on top of Asheville's Town Mountain.

Post-War Years

The rapid expansion of the country's economy in the post-war years was fueled by several jump-start programs designed to bring the American Dream to the middle-class family returning to normal following the war. The house in the suburbs with the white picket fence, a new car, non-rationed gas, full pantries and lots of new babies were the goals of many returning GIs. The Federal Housing Administration and Veterans' Administration mortgage programs and the tremendous infusion of money into the highway program made the dream a reality for many.

Unfortunately, for most areas of western North Carolina the physical and political impediments of the past prevented participation in this boom. Both physical and political isolation from the rest of the state slowed and hindered the construction of roads and other transportation facilities in the mountain region. The political

power base of the state remained in the East and Piedmont. With the state's assumption of responsibility for the road systems and principal funding of the school systems, many of western North Carolina's needs were relegated to a lower priority. When state monies were allocated to the region, they could not go as far because the construction of roads and facilities in the mountains is more costly.

As a result of lack of funding and few improvements, the post-war economic boom reached the mountain region more slowly and with less impact than in the rest of the state. The same impediments to physical development also continued to hamper economic expansion. Lack of available flat land, coupled with inadequate utility systems, roads, rail and natural gas, continued to haunt business recruiters throughout the region. The mountain region suffered a loss of the labor force from its already low population base during the thirties and the forties, adding yet another strike against the area.

A Region In Transition

During the 1960s a period of change began in the mountain region. The mountains were rediscovered as a vacation spot. The Blue Ridge Parkway, built in the 1930s by the CCC program, the Great Smoky Mountain National Park, acquired in 1940, and a resurgence of interest in other resorts including the Cherokee Reservation, Chimney Rock Park, the Biltmore House and Grandfather Mountain provided the base for the tourist market. Families were taking more vacations and had more money to spend.

The Federal Highway program, supplemented by the Appalachian Regional Commission's programs to provide roads, utilities and seed money for economic development, brought new four-lane highways to and through the mountains. Although the impact on recruiting new industry has not materialized to the extent some expected and many desired, the roads did provide greater accessibility for tourists and visitors.

Most of the tourist business had been based upon development and facilities established during the turn of the century. The 1960s brought the first new developments built by the private sector. Early leaders included Hugh Morton, developer of the Grandfather Mountain park featuring the mile-high swinging bridge and wildlife area, and the Robbins brothers, developers of Tweetsie Railroad. Their mountain theme park, located between Blowing Rock and Boone, incorporates a steam locomotive that had been used on a nearby railroad route abandoned 20 years earlier.

The mountains traditionally have been recognized as a summer resort known for mild days and cool nights. Additionally, a peak season had developed in October when the fall colors brought thousands of "leaf lookers" back to the mountains for several weeks. The first of November signified the season's end and a long, cold and economically bare time for many. With the advent in the 1960s of the technology and equipment to make man-made snow, the winter season for the mountain region began. From the mid 1960s to the early 1970s ski resorts developed as far south as north Georgia's Sky Valley, with the largest concentration of resorts in Avery and Watauga counties. In most circumstances the ski facilities were the drawing amenity for the sale of real estate associated with the resort. Some of these facilities, including Sugar Mountain, Beech Mountain, Hound Ears and Hawks Nest, also incorporated golf courses.

Physical and fiscal constraints limited the development of ski resorts. In the brief history of the ski facilities, all of the projects have suffered financial hardships, most resulting in some form of bankruptcy. The vagaries of weather, real estate markets and national economic trends have exacerbated financial problems in a business which operates on a marginal level.

With the increased amount of vacation travel occurring in the nation, western North Carolina was rediscovered by many older travelers who were at or near retirement age and were looking for a location that was environmentally (primarily climatically) better than where they were living. Western North Carolina became an attractive place for residents of the Northeast and Midwest who sought to escape the harsh winters of the "snow belt" and for residents of Florida who decided that they wanted to avoid the sultry heat of the tropical climate. This pattern was not new. However, improved



Grandfather Mountain, a major tourist attraction, includes 2,000 acres of environmentally sensitive land managed by the Nature Conservancy.

access to and within the region, a larger market of people with more money and the relatively low cost of land renewed interest in western North Carolina as a second home and retirement destination.

During the 1960s and '70s, developments catering to second-home and retirement markets were established throughout the region but predominantly along the "rim counties" of western North Carolina. These counties, including Polk, Henderson, Transylvania, Jackson and Macon, are located on the North Carolina-South Carolina border, closest to southern markets. These developments frequently incorporate a natural feature and/or a golf course in their marketing program.

While these counties have active tourism interests and second-home developments, rapid increases in population (especially in Henderson County) coupled with high per-capita income and median age statistics demonstrate the influx of permanent residents retiring to these communities. Other reliable measures of this hypothesis are gleaned from retirement-oriented publications in the 1980s that listed Hendersonville and Brevard as being among the best places to retire.

Land-Use Planning

The region cannot be generalized to include a uniform mix of tourism, retirement and second-home development. However, these three segments of the service industry are the leading components of the economy. The intensity of tourist, resort and retirement development and marketing has increased dramatically since the mid-1960s. Lack of state or local land-use regulations have created physical problems affecting the fragile environment. In some cases roads and utilities have been inadequate to support development, straining local governments' services and facilities. In 1973 a Mountain Area Management Act was proposed to parallel the state's Coastal Area Management Act. This act was defeated and has lain dormant for almost 20 years. Public outcry over the construction of a ten-story condominium complex on Sugar Mountain in 1983 led to a state law regulating ridge-top development.

Interest in both a mountain and a statewide legislative planning initiative has resurfaced in recent years. Currently there are Legislative Study Commissions on both issues. The interest and emphasis on agriculture in Avery and Henderson counties, two counties where resorts, tourism and retirement communities compete with agriculture for valuable land, has resulted in the recent adoption of voluntary farmland preservation programs. Buncombe County, surrounding the City of Asheville, has also adopted a similar program. In these counties, as well as in all counties in the mountains, the agricultural community traditionally has not been receptive to the adoption of any land-use controls. However, in these three counties competition and pressure

to use land and the conflicts and nuisance suits resulting from the close proximity of intensive farming and new residential developments have encouraged many farmers to seek some level of protection.

While there remains a strong faction of natives opposed to land-use regulations, especially those imposed from the state level, there are an increasing number of western North Carolina citizens who recognize the need for some form of protection from uncontrolled development. A growing number of the region's native citizens sense an impending loss of not only the physical qualities of the mountain landscape, but also the social and cultural values and customs they treasure.

Them and Us

As urbanization has intensified and more people from other areas have moved into mountain communities, a divisive "them and us" attitude has frequently resulted. Tourists, second home residents and retirees bring new and different values, frequently more income, and often a lack of knowledge and understanding of the people who originally settled in this region.

Change is occurring in western North Carolina at an increasing rate and will continue as more people discover the region. Some will discover it for its beauty, resources and liveability. Others will discover it because it will be seen as "easy pickings." The past holds that abuses in the region have come from those on the mountain as well as from those "off the mountain." However, the people of the region can manage the pace of change if they find common ground and a unity of purpose. If neither natives nor newcomers exercise leadership, management will be left to those who continue to extract value from the mountains for personal gain with little regard for long-term economic and cultural stability. Lack of responsible management in the mountains will result in significant and irreparable damage to the physical and economic health of the region.

Planning growth and development in western North Carolina will require that common goals, understandings and compromises be reached in each community. Individual plans will need to be developed, based upon the unique history, physical conditions and circumstances found in each community. The planning process in western North Carolina will need flexibility to accommodate the diversity inherent within the region, as well as economic and other incentives for participation. Conversely, penalties are needed for development that is not properly managed. However, flexibility does not mean the process should be avoided or delayed indefinitely. The detrimental impacts of unmanaged growth continue to accrue on a daily basis. Better solutions will be found in action taken on the basis of education and knowledge, not from reactions to emotions and self-interest. CP